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## THE ELECTIVE SYSTEM IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS<sup>1</sup>

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There is, it is true, another side to this question of individuality. Not all the variations are worthy, and it is said that the least commendable may be eliminated by prescribed studies. There is a limit to the desirable development of personal traits. If, indeed, any course of study prescribed for all could search out and stunt in each individual his unworthy variations from the normal, we should have to yield a point in favor of required work. But the argument is not sound. In the first place, it assumes that schoolmen are sufficiently wise to decide just what variations from the normal are good and what are bad—just how far it is well to encourage the development of individuality. To accord such wisdom to the makers of programs is to ignore the experience of centuries. Furthermore, there are as many variations as there are individuals, as many special problems as there are pupils. No one answer will suffice. Studies prescribed for large groups—as they must be in public high schools—cannot satisfy manifold special needs.

Many types of the abnormal have no place at all in public high schools; much less have they a right to influence the course of study for the ninety and nine per cent. of the normal. For the extremely defective there are special public institutions, as there always must be; and there are private schools which find possibly their only convincing and permanent justification in their ability to care for extreme cases as public schools certainly cannot do.

The time has come when the public high school should fit the work to the pupil, and cease worrying the reluctant teacher with the impossible task of making the pupil fit the work. At least, let us cease condemning the teacher because out of these innumerable differences among individuals he is unable to produce “uniform nonentities.” Certainly this is not the purpose of the best teachers of prescribed

<sup>1</sup> Concluded from p. 158.

work; many of them are doing as well as they can to discover and develop the individual; and they do much. That they accomplish no more is the fault of a system which does not encourage or respond to their efforts.

Dean Briggs, of Harvard University, expressing "Some Old-Fashioned Doubts about New-Fashioned Education," phrases a sound and generally accepted principle when he says: "Education should always recognize the fitness of different minds for different work." It is at least pertinent to ask whether the word "always" is not sufficiently comprehensive to include the high-school years. Prescribed courses do not recognize the fitness of different minds for different work; on the contrary, such courses hinder the differentiation of those various individuals in our public schools who are soon to take widely different places in the world outside the schoolroom. No studies should be required of all.

I know that men may still be found clinging to the mediæval doctrine that certain subjects alone train certain faculties of the mind—one subject for the reason, another for the memory, still a third for the imagination, and possibly one royal subject (their specialty) which trains all the faculties. I also know of men who would go hungry rather than sit at a table of thirteen. But ideas which have long been banished to the vast limbo of educational absurdities cannot well affect this question in the present day. The advocates of the elective system believe that it takes an ingenious child to choose a high-school course of studies which (if properly taught—the necessary proviso) will seriously neglect the training of any important faculty of the mind.

For reasons soon to appear, I shall spend but little time on the discussion of educational values. I believe that the prestige of the studies which have been imposed on students most commonly—say, Latin, geometry, algebra—is due to tradition; it is the heritage from an age when the field of knowledge was much narrower than it is today, when science had no place; it is due to this, as well as to the conservative influences so strong in education, and to the remarkable body of teachers and well-organized methods and materials which these subjects, more than others, have had in the past.

But the opponents of the elective system free its advocates from

the need of any discussion of relative values of studies; the reason is plain—the final, incontestable reason why no high-school studies can be sensibly prescribed for all—the opponents of free choice are utterly unable to agree among themselves as to what the prescribed course should be. In proof I could fill volumes with suggested schedules. I have before me more than a hundred different courses of study prescribed for high schools, agreeing in one point only, namely, in prescribing something. For example, some prescribe physiology the first year; others prescribe it the last year; others omit it entirely. When there are not a half-dozen high schools in the entire country, under separate management, with identical courses of study, is it not preposterous to maintain that there is a vital, fixed interrelation and one natural sequence of subjects?

Says S. D. Brooks: "So in a program—much should be insisted on;" and he insists on one program. Says W. T. Harris: "All studies should be required;" and he insists on another program. This diversity of opinion is typical, and, as Professor Greenough says, "fairly represents the breaking up of all the old opinions as to what should constitute a liberal education."

Albert Stickney, a radical adversary of the elective principle, said before the New York Harvard Club: "As to what this prescribed course of study should be, we laymen do not pretend to say; as to that point we are profoundly ignorant." That is just the crux, the fatal weakness in the whole case against the new system. That is at least one difficulty on which both sides must agree, for as to any studies which should be required of all students in all public high schools the advocates of the elective principle are also "profoundly ignorant."

The disagreement as to what those "certain essential studies" are indicates a fallacy in the whole argument. That fallacy is the assumption of the educational value of each subject for all students, whereas contemporary literature, teachers' conventions—all educational discussions—prove that we have no such definite knowledge to guide us. Studies undoubtedly vary in educational worth just as food products vary in nourishing value. But is it sensible to say that therefore a schoolmaster should prescribe the same curriculum for all his pupils, and a physician the same diet for all his patients?

Certainly not, for in both instances the value of the food depends on the power of the individual to assimilate it. The schoolmaster, as well as the physician, must diagnose each case before prescribing. It is impossible to determine, even at a given time, a fixed educational value of any subject for all pupils: there is no such thing.

Still another difficulty is suggested in a recent number of the *School Review*: most of us are inclined to think that the particular studies which we ourselves have pursued are on the whole superior, and that the one study to which we have devoted most time is the aristocrat of the whole group. It is certainly difficult for a teacher to eliminate the personal equation; and if he could do so, I wonder if we should want him.

These, then, seem to be the main reasons for the general disagreement as to what should constitute the prescribed course: the impossibility of successfully educating different individuals by one régime, of determining the fixed value of any study for all pupils, or of eliminating prejudices.

Whatever the reasons may be, the fact remains—a stubborn one for those who decry the elective plan—they cannot agree.

Added to all this we have the lessons of history. I shall not here attempt to epitomize the wearisome account of centuries of prescribed studies. Every age has had its ideal curriculum. We now see, or think we see, that for centuries these have all been wrong. No country at any time has ever devised a school program which to us appears to have been perfectly adapted to the needs of all its people. Still there are men who, unmindful of the infinite diversity among individuals, oblivious of the fatal disagreements among themselves, and regardless of the plain lessons of history, are so presumptuous as fondly to imagine that at last to them—to them alone—has been revealed the one prescribed course which we can safely impose—nay, which we must impose—on all our children.

If at this point we take another look at our syllogism, we find that the combined testimony of both sides of the question overthrows the first premise: with it falls the syllogism. Still, not all the advocates of required studies will be satisfied with the foregoing argument. Here is a man who wishes to test the second premise; to inquire whether the studies most frequently urged as essential for all are

not very largely neglected when prescription is removed. He acknowledges the wide disagreement as to what the fixed course should be, but he believes that his own ideas are right; he is sure that no study or group of studies can take the place of Latin; he is sure that, however widely and variously abnormal an individual may be, the one subject he must take is Latin—or is it physiology? The opinion of such a man—even though mere opinion—should not be lightly set aside. He has a right to ask whether students under the elective system will not avoid the studies which are closest to his own heart. And although the answer cannot affect the judgment of those who accept the preceding argument, the answer is at least interesting.

If students to any extent avoid the studies most commonly defended, surely investigation concerning the actual working of the elective system will show that result. Let us see. The high school in Galesburg, Ill.,<sup>1</sup> the first to make all studies elective, has now had nine years' experience with the elective system. The superintendent says: "There has been no disposition on the part of the pupils to omit the so-called disciplinary studies for those said to be easy; they have not been inclined to allow their own whims to govern them, nor, what is worse, to follow the whims of others." But is this the experience of the whole country? In answering this question, we may consider the reports of the United States commissioner of education as fairly accurate; at any rate, they are the best evidence available for the whole country, and, if they err at all, are as liable to favor one side as the other. The reports which concern us most closely are those from 1889-90 to 1900-1, during which time the elective principle made greatest progress in public high schools.

Now, although there are no subjects included in all prescribed curricula, there are several subjects more frequently insisted on than others, and of these most fear is expressed for Latin, geometry, and algebra. During the onward march of the new principle, what has been the fate of these subjects? Has the number of boys and girls studying these subjects decreased while the number enrolled in other subjects increased? The theorizing of our opponents leads us to think so. Yet the official reports of the United States commissioner of education for the ten years show that the number of students

<sup>1</sup> September, 1895.

in Latin has increased 173 per cent.; in history, 153 per cent.; in geometry, 150 per cent.; in algebra, 141 per cent. In no other subject (except English) has the gain in enrolment been so great.

TABLE I

Studies	1899-90	1900-1	Per cent. of Increase
Latin.....	100,144	273,314	174
History.....	82,909	210,813	152
Geometry.....	59,781	150,788	147
Algebra.....	127,397	308,557	141
German.....	34,208	83,702	131
French.....	28,032	44,889	60
Physics.....	63,644	99,666	50
Chemistry.....	28,665	40,964	43
Greek.....	12,869	14,232	9

This is significant. The studies about which there is most fear are the very studies which have actually progressed most, side by side with the elective system.

This is true for the whole country, but is it true for the largest cities where the freedom of choice has been greatest? The answer is given in the same reports. Compare the tables for the public high schools of the largest fifty cities in the United States with the tables for all other public high schools. The ratio of the number of students taking Latin to the whole number of students in the largest cities does not vary three-tenths of 1 per cent. from the similar ratio in the rest of the country.

But still the man of doubt may ask: What are the figures for the North Atlantic Division of the country where there has been widest acceptance of the system? Here in Table II are the results compiled from the report for 1899-1900 of the commissioner of education:

TABLE II  
Public High Schools

Latin	Greek	French	German	Algebra	Geometry
50.45 47.01	2.63 5.44	8.29 18.48	15.45 19.89	56.96 50.12	27.83 27.66

The table gives the percentage, in each subject, of the whole number of students enrolled in the public high schools—the first row across for the United States, the second for the North Atlantic Division. Surely there is not here sufficient difference to cause the slightest alarm.

Table V gives further evidence on this question—evidence which may be misleading without a note of explanation. The table gives the number of elections in each of twenty-eight subjects for each of nine public high schools of the city of Boston. This material I have collected for the sake of its bearing on the question of elective studies. I have therefore omitted the Boston Latin School and the Girls' Latin School, in which only a part of the work is optional. The table shows that of the 5,318 pupils enrolled in these nine high schools in the year 1903-4, only 1,154 elected Latin. This small proportion is due to the fact that the majority of boys and girls in the city who desired classical courses elected one of the two schools which are not shown in the table. For the whole city the number of high-school students studying Latin is about one-half the whole number enrolled, which is the proportion given by the commissioner of education for the entire country.

All this goes to prove that in the country as a whole, in the largest cities, in the North Atlantic Division, in the city of Boston—everywhere in the United States—the most rapid growth in the last ten years has been in classics, mathematics, history, and modern languages—a fact which overthrows nine-tenths of the theory regarding the probable fate of certain studies. Under the elective system, students have not to an alarming extent avoided these subjects.

Still we are not done with the first part of the issue; it is further held that pupils will choose foolishly, in that they will elect easy courses, or those for which they are not prepared, or those taught by favorite teachers, or those of little value, or disconnected courses. On these points there has been almost endless theorizing. Schoolmasters are fond of the *a priori* assumption that such things must be; they are not fond of the labor of ascertaining just how things *are*, nor does their daily work leave them the time or the energy for such investigation. Some of this work has been done by the Harvard Education Seminary in the years 1900 to 1904, and the results I have arranged in Table III.



In order to secure information regarding the working of the elective system in the public high schools of the United States, the Harvard Education Seminary secured from the graduating classes of fifty-four schools answers to a series of questions. Only those schools are included in Table III which allowed a large measure of freedom to pupils. A total of 2,485 individual sets of answers were received.

Regarding the motives which determined the choice of studies, the following questions were asked:

Has your choice of studies been determined by any of the following reasons:

- a) Temporary interest due to the recommendation of other students.
  - b) The advice of teachers, parents, or guardians.
  - c) Deliberate choice in accordance with your own tastes.
  - d) The desire to avoid difficult subjects.
  - e) If two or more of these reasons have determined your choices, please say so.
- If other reasons than those enumerated have determined your choices, please give them.

TABLE III

Table of Replies from 2,485 Pupils, in the Graduating Classes of Fifty-four High Schools

No.	School	No. of Replies	"Yes" to a	"Yes" to b	"Yes" to c	"Yes" to d	"Yes" to e	Per Cent. Replying "Yes" to				
								a	b	c	d	e
1	Roxbury.....	74	1	60	54	2	39	1	81	73	2	53
2	Lawrence.....	27	1	20	24	2	8	4	74	88	7	29
3	Leominster....	17	0	13	13	1	2	...	76	76	6	12
4	Chicopee.....	24	0	13	15	3	4	0	54	63	13	17
5	Holyoke.....	44	14	43	34	9	23	32	98	77	20	52
6	Springfield....	67	2	51	57	6	56	3	74	85	9	68
7	Worcester.....	149	21	109	131	35	56	14	73	88	24	37
8	Providence, R.I.	68	10	45	55	1	45	14	66	84	1	66
9	Woonsocket....	18	0	11	18	0	3	0	61	100	0	17
10	Great Falls, N. Y.....	35	13	33	35	1	8	37	94	100	3	22
11	Utica Free Academy....	23	2	13	17	0	18	9	56	73	0	78
12	New Rochelle..	14	0	13	14	0	2	0	95	100	0	13
13	Saratoga.....	22	2	14	16	1	6	9	64	72	4	27
14	Jamestown....	38	3	35	30	3	12	8	92	78	8	32
15	Binghamton... Washburn....	45	7	34	42	4	9	15	75	93	9	20
16	Hoosick Falls..	8	1	7	6	0	0	12	88	75	0	0
17	Geneva.....	31	9	31	29	5	2	29	100	93	16	6
18	Corning.....	14	1	11	14	0	5	7	74	100	0	36
19	Topeka.....	12	0	11	12	0	4	0	91	100	0	25
20	Canton, O.....	75	16	62	71	10	8	21	83	95	13	11
21		49	2	38	42	1	10	4	76	84	2	20

TABLE III—Continued

No.	School	No. of Replies	"Yes" to a	"Yes" to b	"Yes" to c	"Yes" to d	"Yes" to e	Per Cent. Replying "Yes" to				
								a	b	c	d	e
22	Hamilton.....	61	4	44	60	3	4	6	72	98	5	6
23	Cleveland (Central).....	66	8	45	57	1	10	12	64	86	2	15
24	Galesburg, Ill. .	125	27	98	118	16	47	21	79	94	13	37
25	Rockford.....	48	9	34	44	15	5	18	71	91	31	10
26	Evanston Township....	66	7	46	63	10	21	11	70	95	15	31
27	Goshen, Ind....	20	2	16	20	0	0	10	80	100	0	0
28	Terre Haute....	44	1	24	39	7	22	2	54	88	16	50
29	Indianapolis (Manual).....	62	5	45	43	5	13	8	72	69	8	21
30	Indianapolis (Academy)....	68	8	50	63	5	31	10	73	92	7	45
31	Leavenworth, Kan.....	26	5	26	23	5	10	19	100	90	19	38
32	Lincoln, Neb..	40	7	35	39	10	7	17	87	97	25	17
33	Crete.....	36	2	13	32	1	12	6	36	88	3	33
34	Nebraska City..	26	0	21	26	0	3	0	78	100	0	11
35	Fresno, Cal....	15	3	7	12	2	6	20	47	80	13	40
36	Belmont.....	10	1	5	10	0	..	10	60	100	0	..
37	Brockton.....	23	3	12	14	3	..	13	52	61	13	..
38	Brookline.....	33	1	26	33	2	..	3	78	100	6	..
39	Cambridge (English)....	51	9	42	50	16	..	18	82	98	31	..
40	Cambridge (Latin).....	63	2	40	54	9	..	3	63	86	14	..
41	Chelsea.....	56	5	34	47	15	..	9	61	84	24	..
42	Fitchburg.....	43	5	30	36	3	..	12	69	81	7	..
43	Gloucester. . .	37	1	28	24	2	..	3	75	65	5	..
44	Lowell.....	83	9	76	61	7	..	11	91	73	8	..
45	Lynn (English)	102	27	64	95	15	..	26	63	93	15	..
46	Lynn (Latin)..	44	7	32	42	5	..	16	73	95	11	..
47	Malden.....	18	2	11	16	3	..	11	61	89	17	..
48	Medford.....	54	14	33	46	17	..	26	61	85	31	..
49	Melrose.....	34	3	29	33	0	..	9	85	98	0	..
50	New Bedford..	41	4	35	41	7	..	10	85	100	17	..
51	Newton.....	42	5	32	38	12	..	12	76	90	28	..
52	Quincy.....	55	1	45	48	3	..	2	82	87	5	..
53	Salem.....	52	0	27	37	2	..	0	52	71	3	..
54	Somerville.....	87	9	69	60	0	..	10	79	79	0	..
	Grand total..	2485	302	1852	2162	285	511	12.1	74.5	87.	11.4	20.5

Of the 2,485 students who replied to these questions, 302, or 12.1 per cent., replied that they had been influenced in their choice of studies by temporary interest due to the recommendation of other students; 1,852 or 74.5 per cent., replied that their choice of studies had been determined wholly or in part by the advice of teachers,

TABLE IV  
HIGH SCHOOLS IN EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS

City	Total No. of Pupils Replying	No. Replying "Yes," to a	Per cent.	No. Replying "Yes," to b	Per cent.	No. Replying "Yes," to c	Per cent.	No. Replying "Yes," to d	Per cent.	Total No. of Affirmative Replies
Belmont.....	10	1	10	6	60	10	100	0	0	17
Brockton.....	23	3	13	12	52	14	61	3	13	32
Brookline.....	33	1	3	26	78	33	100	2	6	62
Cambridge (Eng. High)...	51	9	18	42	82	50	98	16	31	117
Cambridge (Latin).....	63	2	3	40	63	54	86	9	14	105
Chelsea.....	56	5	9	34	61	47	84	15	24	101
Fitchburg.....	43	5	12	30	69	36	81	3	7	74
Gloucester.....	37	1	3	28	75	24	65	2	5	55
Lowell.....	83	9	11	76	91	61	73	7	8	153
Lynn (Eng. High).....	102	27	26	64	63	95	93	15	15	201
Lynn (Latin).....	44	7	16	32	73	42	95	5	11	86
Malden.....	18	2	11	11	61	16	80	3	17	32
Medford.....	54	14	26	33	61	46	85	17	31	110
Melrose.....	34	3	9	29	85	33	98	0	0	65
New Bedford.....	41	4	10	35	85	41	100	7	17	87
Newton.....	42	5	12	32	76	38	90	12	28	87
Quincy.....	55	1	2	45	82	48	87	3	5	97
Salem.....	52	0	0	27	52	37	71	2	3	66
Somerville.....	87	9	10	69	79	69	79	0	0	147
Total.....	928	108	11.6	671	72.3	794	85.5	121	13	1694
"No," or not replying..		820	88.4	257	27.7	134	14.5	807	87	2018
Total possible replies.....										3712

Has your choice of studies been determined by any of the following reasons:

	"Yes"	"No" or Unanswered
a) Temporary interest due to the recommendation of other students.....	11.6%	88.4%
b) The advice of teachers, parents, or guardians.....	72.3	27.7
c) Deliberate choice in accordance with your own tastes.....	85.5	14.5
d) The desire to avoid difficult subjects.....	13.0	87.0

parents, or guardians; 2,162, or 87 per cent., replied that they had deliberately chosen all or the greater part of their studies in accordance with their own tastes; 285, or 11 per cent., replied that in one or more choices they were influenced by the desire to avoid difficult subjects.

TABLE V

Showing the Number of Elections in Each of Twenty-eight Subjects for Each of Nine Public High Schools of the City of Boston

No. of Pupils	Boston High Schools	English	History	Civil Government	Commercial Law	Economics	Latin	Greek	French	German	Spanish	Algebra	Geometry	Higher Mathematics	Biology
291	Brighton.....	273	159	8	8	12	113	11	143	50	7	98	47	12	51
226	Charlestown.....	175	96	13	12	12	23	0	121	17	0	46	4	0	33
1078	Dorchester.....	1030	535	54	67	14	318	0	672	203	23	244	71	87	203
424	East Boston.....	402	297	0	27	0	83	5	209	23	0	107	32	26	118
834	English High.....	818	423	48	81	10	88	0	571	104	28	437	122	61	25
898	Girls' High.....	972	855	94	0	0	194	0	622	142	0	218	164	21	361
533	South Boston.....	522	243	5	0	0	103	5	248	83	64	161	35	13	117
671	Roxbury.....	652	364	0	30	0	123	34	334	262	0	222	80	0	102
363	West Roxbury.....	357	282	0	7	0	107	7	201	61	0	132	48	20	59
	Total .....	5201	3194	222	232	36	1154	62	3093	945	122	1659	603	240	1129

  

No. of Pupils	Boston High Schools	Commercial Geography	Physiology	Physical Geography	Physics	Chemistry	Astronomy	Drawing	Bookkeeping	Photography and Typewriting	Household Art	Music	Gymnastics	Military Drill	Hygiene
291	Brighton.....	11	33	0	7	14	2	114	84	135	22	250	167	80	117
226	Charlestown.....	0	8	0	9	11	0	103	95	86	0	179	128	46	107
1078	Dorchester.....	67	30	15	126	109	0	366	446	205	0	834	630	305	759
424	East Boston.....	27	30	16	17	77	0	130	193	116	0	392	314	78	185
834	English High.....	81	0	0	60	62	0	256	324	238	0	187	153	743	760
898	Girls' High.....	46	77	0	130	91	14	347	397	157	0	826	864	0	457
533	South Boston.....	37	10	0	18	58	9	261	131	200	0	451	380	150	219
671	Roxbury.....	0	26	24	11	137	0	376	237	297	45	366	480	138	185
363	West Roxbury.....	0	0	23	37	56	0	110	110	68	16	266	237	81	323
	Total .....	269	223	87	424	615	25	2045	2117	1502	83	3745	3353	1621	3112

Of the 1,557 pupils in the first thirty-five schools included in Table III, 511 (that is, about one-third) gave, in reply to question *e*, various motives for choice which may be included under the general term "vocational needs."

The record of this investigation in the public high schools of eastern Massachusetts, which is given separately in Table IV, shows results almost exactly the same as those derived from the whole number of schools in Table III.

Regarding the extent to which pupils are influenced in the selection of studies by the action of their associates, a comparison of the programs of one class of pupils for four years gives good evidence.

TABLE VI

Table for Nine High Schools of Boston (1903-4)

	Per Cent. of Offerings	Per Cent. of Electives
English.....	8.5	19.7
French.....	8.6	13.4
Mathematics.....	9.0	10.3
Bookkeeping.....	4.9	9.8
History.....	7.0	9.2
Phonography and typewriting.....	9.8	8.3
Drawing.....	7.1	6.2
Latin.....	9.7	5.3
Biology.....	3.5	4.7
German.....	7.4	4.0
Chemistry.....	4.5	2.8
Physics.....	3.5	1.8
Commercial Geography.....	1.2	0.7
Commercial Law.....	1.4	0.6
Physiology.....	0.4	0.5
Manual training.....	0.4	0.5
Civil government.....	1.2	0.5
Spanish.....	3.6	0.5
Greek.....	3.7	0.3
Physical Geography.....	1.1	0.3
Household Art.....	0.8	0.3
Astronomy.....	0.9	0.1
Economics.....	1.0	0.1

For this purpose take the high school of Galesburg, Ill. The 125 reports sent to the Harvard Education Seminary by the members of the senior class of this school exhibit 119 different programs of study; they seem to show independent, deliberate choice.

The 2,485 pupils represented in Table III gave copies of their programs of study for each year of their high-school course. An examination of those few reports which gave temporary interest or the desire to avoid difficult subjects as motives for choice showed that the resulting programs of study differed but little from the programs of other students. In such a large number there were undoubtedly some mistakes, yet, in the opinions of the principals, so far as those opinions were given, all the programs were better suited to the individuals than any one prescribed course could be.

As to the value of these replies from students there may well be difference of opinion. My own belief is that the reports as a whole may be taken as the honest, careful judgment of each individual as to the motives which determined his choice of studies. The replies

were collected and tabulated by men of varied opinions regarding the elective system, who were not striving to make the reports read one way or the other. Furthermore, wherever the student gave as a reason for choice the desire to avoid difficult subjects, the choice was not one that could be condemned without a knowledge of the individual pupil. For example, one pupil said frankly: "Took German instead of Latin; it was easier, and I always like to have things as easy as possible." Shall we say that even this was *surely* an unwise choice? Not if the elective system is offered with its necessary proviso, that what a boy chooses, that he must do well.

The table of replies is not exact, and the significance of the investigation cannot be given in figures. It was not always easy to determine what the student tried to say. Here, for an extreme instance, is one reply to the question concerning motives for choice:

Contrary to the recommendation of my A grammar teacher I choose the English course in preference to the Latin course because of the advice of my father and in accordance with my own tastes because I had determined to give my time and attention and energy to art after I graduated and I thought Latin unessential for such a course and thus laid greater stress on Mathematics. [What could the boy have studied in the *English* course!]

How can it be that nearly all of these 2,485 elected programs of study are apparently better for the particular pupils than any prescribed course could be? Why are not these programs "freaky," disconnected, or unduly specialized; why do they not go far astray? The reason is that pupils are protected from unwise choices by many natural safeguards. This the opponents of the system have admitted in urging that absolutely free choice is not possible. To be sure, it is not. So, when such a strenuous opponent as Mr. W. J. S. Bryan, of St. Louis, points out the inherent difficulties in the way of free choice, he slips over, apparently unwittingly, to the goodly company of elective-system advocates. The system, as it is and must be administered, is protected in many ways.

Of these natural safeguards there are at least eight worth mentioning. Each points the course through safe channels; together they prevent the wrecks which are feared. First, of all there is the advice of teachers and parents, which no system can eliminate. Happily such advice becomes more and more intelligent, more and more valued by pupils, hence more and more effective in preventing mis-

takes as the chances for election increase. There is also powerful tradition concerning studies, which exerts such influence that nearly all are loath to stray far from blazed paths. There is the capacity of the pupil—physical and mental—which limits the number of possible choices. There is the fixed number of school hours per day, which restricts the scope of school programs. There is the limited teaching force, which cannot undertake to teach “fringe” courses elected by the scattering few.

Still another restriction affects an increasing number of students—the entrance requirements of higher institutions: students who find their work laid out for them in college catalogues have only restricted options. Another safeguard lies in making choice deliberate: pupils on graduating from grammar schools are asked to consider what they will study in the high school. Pupils already in the high school are asked to choose tentative programs for the following year, and during the long vacation they have time to think over their choices. At the opening of the school year there are conferences, that the pupils may not go about their work blindly.

Beyond all these safeguards there is one of even greater importance—the exceedingly restrictive limitation due to the sequence and dependence of studies, not a human, but a divine principle. A pupil cannot elect second-year Latin before he has completed the beginners’ course; he cannot pursue higher mathematics without the foundations; other courses he cannot elect until he reaches the year in which it is deemed wise to offer them. Ah, but does not such restriction destroy the elective system? On the contrary, without these natural safeguards there would be nothing we could properly call a “system.” Hedging electives in this way is not abandoning the principle; it is offering guidance precisely where guidance is most needed—in order to protect rational choice, and destroy the chance for “crazy patchwork.”

In the advice of friends, in tradition, in physical and mental limitations, in the number of hours and the number of teachers available, in college requirements, in deliberate choice, in the laws of dependence and sequence applied to the order of studies—in all these ways, and more, nearly every pupil is amply protected from the dangers of foolish choice.

In urging the inability of pupils to choose wisely, the opponents of the new system often employ amusing illustrations which prove nothing, and false analogies which are unfortunately accepted by a prejudiced public as substitutes for evidence and reason. A fair example of this kind of talk is the following editorial article from a Chicago paper;

The average high-school boy has hardly got beyond the period when he is puzzled to decide whether he will be a general, an admiral, or a circus clown. To throw open a course of study to the election of such immature minds would be as edifying a spectacle as to allow an infant to experiment with different-colored candies, for the similitude could be extended to the ultimate effect on brains and bowels.

This quotation was deemed worthy a place in the report of the National Educational Association for 1900 (p. 435). It is the kind of argument which is constantly urged against the elective system. Yet the first sentence not only assumes that there is such a being as "the average high-school boy," which, for the purpose at hand, not all of us are ready to admit, but it also begs the entire question as to the maturity of high-school pupils. The second sentence, making no distinction between infancy and adolescence, employs a false analogy. This would seem to be fallacy enough to pack into one brief quotation, but a little thought will discover yet another false assumption—that the elective system offers the child much that is useless or really harmful, as the colored candies are assumed to be. The truth is that if any curriculum embraces studies which are useless, or harmful, or prematurely offered, the fault is not with the elective system, but with those who allow such studies any place in the program.

More than all this, such fallacious argument emphasizes a positive virtue of the system it decries. The history of education and the present varied and rapidly changing ideas concerning the essential studies show the probability of many mistakes in school programs. The studies may be ill-timed, ill-suited, or ill-taught—note that. Under either system some errors must be made. The question is whether we shall impose these on all alike, or leave open the possibility of avoiding them. Which are worse, the mistakes of a few persons, or mistakes which are prescribed for all? The latter are like



the rain of heaven, not in its gentle quality, but in falling on the just and the unjust. There is no escape. Prescribed errors ravage not only the dull, lazy, shiftless boys and girls—who are not to be harmed much by anything in education—but also the bright, the energetic, the mature. Public educational enterprises should be managed not primarily for the customer who is looking for a chance to toss his precious bundle under the counter and run out, but for the one who is determined to have the best in the store for his particular needs.

It must be conceded that the training in the choice of studies, like every form of training in independent action, leaves open some chance for error. The elective system does not pretend to stop all educational mistakes and wastes; but the monstrous prescribed mistakes and wastes of the old system it reduces to a minimum.

The objection is raised that the foolish pupils will choose “favorite teachers” in preference to necessary subjects; here is another chance for them to go astray under the elective system—although it must be admitted that to popular teachers this danger seems slight. How, indeed, can we have any faith in an objection which is founded on the necessary study fallacy? Beyond that foundation the objection contains nothing except a distinct merit of the new system, for the election of teachers is often more important than the election of studies. All honor to the system which enables a boy or girl to escape a hated teacher—a teacher who may instil in that particular pupil aversion to all study. Let him choose his “favorite teacher,” whatever the subject may be.

My personal experience in choosing a teacher regardless of the subject she taught is not exceptional. In the high school I elected a course in history for the sake of getting closer to the teacher. At the end of the year it would have puzzled me to remember what the course was about, except that some queen or other was or was not justified in killing some other queen, who was very beautiful. But one purpose I did grasp so firmly that it has not escaped: through the influence of that teacher I came to feel the value of a higher education and a life worth living. Shall we call that course a failure because I learned merely that I wanted to do something well? Or shall we deem it a wise system which allows the pupil to choose his favorite teacher?

We have now to consider the propositions of those who seek for compromises between the elective and prescribed systems which will secure the good and eliminate the evil of both. The group system is suggested. It began by offering two courses, one called "classical" and one called "scientific." Soon a "business course" was introduced, and, in many schools, an "English course," so called apparently because it especially neglected English. The number of groups multiplied until in some schools (the Detroit High School is an example) nine courses were offered—nine distinct groups. Most significant of all is the argument that the group system is not too rigid, since, by special permission, a pupil who has elected one group of studies may make substitutions from other groups. A good plan, indeed! But what has become of the system? When its only distinct feature, namely, the lines between the groups, is abolished, there is left only the elective system.

The faults with the group system are that the units of choice are too large, and it attempts to enforce specialization. The tendency is always toward the multiplication of groups—a happy tendency, say the friends of the elective plan, for a group system so far differentiated as to provide for the needs of each student is an ideal system. It offers the ideal program, which must be an individual program.

Another proposed plan is partial election. Prescribe the main substance and allow the pupil to choose the fringe. The main fault with this suggestion has already been discussed; to one who believes the propositions above defended a system of partial election seems a farce. However important the trimmings may be, the student has a right to cut out the cloth of his education; he has a right to do this when he is hesitating, with a grammar-school diploma in his hand, between earning a few dollars a week as an unskilled workman and entering the high school. Furthermore, elective and prescribed studies side by side are not easily compatible; each brings out the worst features of the other.<sup>1</sup> Partial election will not suffice.

<sup>1</sup> "Prescribed studies, side by side with electives, appear a bondage; elective, side by side with prescribed, an indulgence. So long as all studies are prescribed, one may be set above the other in the mind of the pupil on the ground of intrinsic worth; let certain studies express the pupil's wishes, and almost certainly the remainder, valuable as they may be in themselves, will express his disesteem."—Professor George H. Palmer, *The New Education*.

The third division of our issue concerns the effect of the elective system on teachers. It is notably good. Give the pupils a chance to choose, and you have given teachers a chance to see the effect of their work, and schools a chance of ridding themselves more easily of inefficient teachers. Under the prescribed plan, an intolerant, sluggish, unprogressive teacher is annually apportioned a roomful of victims, regardless of their mental attitude toward their persecutor. The elective system tends to force such persons to become better teachers or leave the profession.

The elective system demands the devotion and sympathy of teachers and principals. It requires much conference among teachers, parents, pupils, thus offering incentives to personal contact, which incentives are deplorably lacking under a fixed régime. The pupil sees at the start that his teachers, who are helping him to plan a course with his own highest interests in view, are true friends, worthy of his confidence and his gratitude. Far from being a *laissez-faire* policy, the free-choice plan demands the highest ability of teachers and increases their responsibility.

To good teachers this added responsibility means added pleasure. To come into more sympathetic relations with the adolescent mind, to become counselors and friends in the highest sense, to treat individuals always as individuals—to do this is to gain the legitimate reward of every workman, joy in labor. The system which contributes most largely to this reward is the one which tends to abolish the worn treadmill, the taskmaster, and reluctant, forced pupils—the system which discovers and respects the individual.

We come now to the moral argument. At once we meet the drudgery theory which holds that it is good for boys and girls, who are naturally inclined to rebel against authority, to be compelled to do work which they dislike, in order to learn submission to the external order of things. Such is the conventional moral defense of prescribed studies. Many teachers are like bicycle dealers who should persist in offering nothing but solid tires, with the idea that pneumatic tires are immorally easy. Many schools are still run on hard tires.

The elective system is morally defensible because it honors the will and stimulates the interest, willingness, sense of responsibility, and enthusiasm of pupils as no compulsory system can. When a

pupil is studying physics because he likes it, because of personal interests or mental aptitudes, he puts his heart into the work. In no other way can he make it excellent. Mechanical diligence, passive docility, unreasoning acceptance of commands, patient drudgery—these may be fostered by the whip, as they were in slave ships of old; these may be cultivated in some pupils by the old prescribed curriculum. But the aim of modern education should be to replace these qualities by spontaneous attack, interest, reasoning choice, enthusiastic work.

The elective system makes the student conscious of what he is doing, trains him in independent choice, and so uplifts his character. In pursuing his own ideal, there is moral worth, even though there be no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow; but in submitting to overwhelming force, there is no moral worth. Comenius told us all this long before it had practical application in our schools. He said:

The attempt to compel nature into a course into which she is not inclined is to quarrel with nature and is fruitless striving. Since the servant is the teacher, not the master or reconstructor of nature, let him not drive forcibly when he sees the child attempting that for which he has no skill. Let everyone unhindered proceed with that to which, in accordance with the will of heaven, his natural inclination attracts him, and he will later be enabled to serve God and humanity.

As a last argument in favor of complete election for the public high school, we may note its adaptation to several needs of modern democratic communities. First, it attracts more pupils to high schools and keeps them longer there. The emphasis on those studies usually deemed the foundation of a liberal education prevents the public high school from being truly public. If it is to belong to the people, it must serve them regardless of the demands of higher institutions. The public high school is not primarily to prepare pupils for higher schools. According to the latest report of the United States commissioner of education, of the total enrolment of American students—public and private, elementary, secondary, collegiate, normal, law, medical, theological, technological—94.38 per cent. were in elementary schools, 4.21 per cent. in secondary schools, and 1.41 per cent. in all the rest put together. Of every hundred pupils in America, ninety-four do not reach the high school; of every hundred high-school pupils, only eleven are prepared for college. The public high school should aim to secure more than 4.21 per cent. of the school population, and should provide primarily for the large

majority of pupils who will never enter higher schools. There should be laid out a straight road to college, but there should also be roads leading to the various lives which various pupils are to lead. So much is commonplace.

"The higher education," says Lord Kelvin, "has two purposes: first, to enable the student to earn a livelihood, and, second, to make life worth living." An industrial democracy which neglects either of these functions fails to accomplish the purpose of education—to make men and women as useful and as happy as possible, to prepare for "complete living." Consequently, in spite of the defenders of the classics, who warn us to beware the utilitarian spirit of the age, modern schools have discarded the programs of ancient and mediæval times as wholly unsuited to the present needs of the majority of the people. To the 94 per cent. of pupils who believe that they cannot afford four years at high school, something should be offered at the start which clearly will be of value to them in the coming life-work.

Complete election in the first year of high school surely increases the attendance. Evidence is on every hand. Two years after the introduction of the new system in the public high school at Galesburg, Ill., the school building had to be more than doubled to accommodate the applicants for admission. Formerly one pupil out of eleven in the lower schools entered the high school, and thirty-six graduated; two years later, one out of five entered high school and ninety graduated. The one great cause of these increases was the elective system.

There is another important advantage of the elective system which is frequently overlooked. Many are kept in school through the entire course who do not take the college preparatory studies, but who afterward decide to go to college. The pupils thus influenced to continue their education would early have been driven out of school, had they not been permitted to elect a course which seemed to them suited to their needs.

Having already carried this paper to what may seem an unnecessary length, I shall not add a detailed conclusion. The sixfold argument in favor of the complete elective system in public high schools, which it has been my purpose to prove, is carefully outlined in the introduction. To that I refer the reader who desires a summary of the whole argument.